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There's a right and a wrong way for unis to respond to disadvantage

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La Trobe University's Andrew Harvey says that universities are increasingly accountable for their students' employability.

In the post-pandemic workplace, university graduates will face fierce competition for jobs. Graduate outcomes already vary widely, and are typically worse for new migrants and students with a disability. Improving the employability of all graduates will thus be a priority, particularly as government funding now rewards universities with high graduate employment. For institutions, stronger employability strategies will need to include inclusive careers programs and approaches to address workplace bias.

One notable new migrant group is the Somali Australian community, which numbers around 16,000 people nationally. In a [recent research report](#), we analysed education and employment outcomes for this group, revealing new challenges for the university sector. Consistent with many new migrant groups, we found high levels of university aspiration and participation. At the age of 19, Somali Australians are more likely than other Australians to be enrolled in higher education. Our interviewees spoke frequently of the high value of education and their motivations to study.

Strikingly though, access to education is not matched by strong graduate outcomes. As with most groups, employment rates for Somali Australians do increase with each new level of education attained. However, a Somali Australian with a bachelor degree is about as likely to be unemployed as another Australian who has left school at Year 10 or earlier. Higher education improves employment outcomes for all groups, but not all degrees are treated equally.

There are several explanations for this disconnect between over-representation at university and underemployment afterwards. Research confirms that many new migrant groups lack access to the social and employment networks valued by employers, partly because of their relatively recent arrival to the country. Sometimes, an overt focus on academic achievement can also limit participation in internships and placements, which hinders graduate employment prospects. We also found a strong commitment among Somali Australian interviewees to supporting their families and communities. This commitment is valuable but rarely valued, and it can limit capacity to undertake extra-curricular activities such as membership of university clubs and societies.

Beyond these factors, we found a consistent theme of workforce discrimination. We heard multiple examples of bias, with job applicants discriminated against by their name, skin colour, accent, clothing, and religious beliefs. While most major employers are formally committed to equal opportunity, the existence of bias is often subtle and unconscious, and includes the common trend of employers seeking to hire staff in their own likeness. Trends in the workplace are now a direct concern of universities, who are of course themselves large employers. In a post-pandemic marketplace though, migrant graduates may find it even harder to gain employment.

Students with a disability are another substantial group for whom graduate outcomes are relatively low. These students comprise the fastest growing equity group, with numbers more than doubling in the past decade. Despite this growth, our analysis of performance-based funding found that graduates with a disability have employment rates six to ten percentage points lower than other graduates. This relative underemployment is partly caused by similar issues of employer bias faced by new migrants, indigenous students, and other marginalised groups. These groups have already been hardest hit by the pandemic.

For universities, the relative employment underperformance of new migrants and students with a disability now directly threatens budgets. As the undergraduate participation of both groups rises rapidly, their graduate outcomes will affect the perceived performance and actual funding of institutions. An unethical response to this challenge would be to limit university access to groups at risk of lower graduate outcomes. Such a response has been common under performance-based funding models in the United States, with some universities decreasing access to black and Latinx students.

Yet universities can respond much more productively to address inequitable graduate outcomes. Some universities already provide targeted careers services for students with a disability or from refugee backgrounds, working with industry and specialist employment partnerships. Ensuring more equitable participation in extra-curricular activities is also important. Those who undertake study abroad, internships, or activities within clubs and societies tend to be students from relatively privileged backgrounds. Other students need financial and logistical support to secure these opportunities, requiring assistance from international offices, careers services, and student unions.

Equally, diversity needs to be harnessed as a strength. Many overlooked graduates speak multiple languages and embody resilience, dedication, and commitment to family, community, and society.

Universities need to work with industry to ensure that such qualities are recognised and valued in the hiring process, and that all staff are better educated about the prevalence and harm of unconscious bias.

Increasingly, universities are accountable for the employability of students, including those from equity groups. This accountability extends to providing targeted support, ensuring broad participation in extra-curricular activities, and offering careers education within mainstream curriculum. Further, universities can use their own position as large employers and partners to address workforce discrimination and promote a culture that recognises and rewards graduate diversity. Ensuring a diverse and productive workforce will be more critical than ever in the post-pandemic economy.

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